the Chicago Theatre

Preliminary Summary of Information
September 11, 1978

Commission on Chicago Historical
and Architectural Landmarks

CHICAGO THEATRE
175 North State Street
Chicago, Illinois

Date of Construction: 1921

Architects: C. W. & George L. Rapp

The Chicago Theatre opened on Wednesday, October 26, 1921. The next day, Carl Sandburg in his *Daily News* column, "Motion Pictures," reviewed both the opening and the main feature, "The Sign on the Door," starring Norma Talmadge:

> The Chicago Theater had a regular Balaban and Katz opening last night with a bing and a boom heard throughout the loop district and beyond, making a sum total of an evening sure to linger in the memories of all who were there and got in and all who joined the stormers outside who failed to get in.
>
> The whole works was auspicious and sesquipedalian all around, from the marble colyums [sic], the circular staircases, the lighted mysterious dome and niches on down to the ushers, usherettes and the bevies of men in evening dress acting like the place was the Blackstone lobby or the Union League club.
>
> We may say either that the place as finally fixed up at a figger something like $4,000,000 looks like a building with the kind of embellishment that will capture the multitude while at the same time, with respect to art and architecture, there are much-bragged structures, such as the Congressional library in Washington, that make no comparison with the new Chicago theater in the matter of shine, glitter, and spread of munificence.
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> The 5,000 seats were filled before the hour of 5:30, when the building was not only opened by Balaban and Katz but was sort of formally accepted by Charles A. Wacker for the people of Chicago, who are sponsors of the Chicago plan.
>
> At 8 o'clock and again the sidewalks were crowded with folks waiting to get in. Not until after the main picture run at 10:30 was over did the sidewalks get clear and the police, mounted and afoot, breathe easy....

Whether or not, one got into the theatre that evening, the opening of the Chicago Theatre ushered in a new national experience and soon introduced the Midwest, Chicagoans, and the Loop to the grand motion picture palace.

Motion pictures were not new. In 1885, George Eastman and Hannibal Goodwin had developed celluloid film, and the idea of motion created through the rapid movement of still photographs was well established. Thomas Edison, however, produced the first workable motion picture machine in 1889. His Kinetoscope was a popular success at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and prompted others to further develop the idea.

One so inspired was George K. Spoor in Chicago. Only one person could view each showing of the Kinetoscope which prompted Spoor to work on a method of projecting the image onto a screen. By combining the high intensity light of a calcium lamp and a lens, he produced his Kinodrome which was similar to a system being developed at this same time in France by Auguste Lumiere. Spoor then started the National Film Renting Company to supply pictures to be shown in vaudeville houses on his "projector."

William N. Selig, another Chicagoan and a photographer, was at the same time developing and refining the work begun by Lumiere. Reversing the projection process, he created a motion picture camera. By 1896, Selig was manufacturing the Selig Standard Camera, the Selig Polyscope (projector), and making commercial films for use in the Polyscope.

In 1907, Spoor teamed up with G. M. Anderson who was then a leading actor with the Edison Company and star of its classic picture "The Great Train Robbery." They formed the Peerless Film Manufacturing Company which soon became Essanay. Essanay produced both industrial films and short dramas. Movies starring Bevery Bayne, Francis X. Bushman, Wallace Beery, Gloria Swanson, Ben Turpin, and Charlie Chaplin soon established Essanay as a major film studio and briefly established Chicago as the center of this new industry. Besides Essanay and Selig, the American Film Manufacturing Company, the Ebony Film Corporation (the first black-owned and-operated film studio), and Independent Motion Pictures (which under Irving Thalberg soon became Universal Pictures) were in production here. By 1915, however, the studios had discovered California where the sun always shines and where it was consequently possible to film outdoors all year long. Hollywood soon became the center of film production.

The nickelodeon was the motion picture emporium. To set up a nickelodeon, one had to go no further than the Sears, Roebuck catalogue which could supply everything needed to convert an empty storefront into a "five-cent theater" and, as the catalogue stated, "the low price of admission is an inducement which many people

cannot resist." In 1902, Chicago's city directory listed one nickelodeon. By 1913, there were 606 nickelodeons, most of which were converted storefronts.

Abraham and Barney Balaban entered the nickelodeon business in 1908. They opened The Kedzie, located at Kedzie Avenue and Twelfth Street (Roosevelt Road), in a converted storefront with a seating capacity of one hundred. Their family venture prospered and set them on the road to becoming the owners of one of the nation's largest movie theatre chains. By 1913, the Balabans had entered into partnership with Samuel Katz. In that year, the firm of Balaban and Katz opened its first true movie theatre. The Circle Theatre had about 1000 seats. In 1916, they were ready to build their first delux house and hired the Rapp brothers to design it.

The firm of C. W. & George L. Rapp was formed in 1906. Cornelius W. Rapp was the older of the two brothers. Prior to the formation of the firm, he had designed vaudeville houses and had made the acquaintance of the Balaban brothers. George Lesley Rapp started his career as an assistant designer for Edmund Krause who was then designing the Majestic (now the Shubert) Theatre in Chicago. Their previous individual experience set the stage for the firm's development. Designing motion picture houses, which were then beginning to replace the storefront nickelodeons, became their main business.

Their Central Park Theatre opened in 1917. The result of a successful combination of enterpreneurs and experienced architects, the Central Park was indeed a deluxe house by 1917 standards. The theatre had 2400 seats, a mezzanine and a balcony, and was "air conditioned" as a result of Barney Balaban's earlier experience in the cold storage business. "Comfortably Cool" would become a Balaban and Katz trademark. However, the Balaban and Katz theatre chain's most enduring trademark was only then developing. Their stock-in-trade was fantasy. Motion pictures had captivated the American public, and movie fantasy was about to spill off the silver screen to engulf patrons in an atmosphere of fantasy within the motion picture palace. New York's Capital Theatre (now demolished) opened in 1919, previewing the glamour and fantasy to come in the 1920s. Balaban and Katz and the Rapps began work on the Rivoli (also demolished) on Chicago's South Side, and on the Chicago, the first Loop theatre designed for motion pictures. The Tivoli opened a few months before the grand opening of the Chicago Theatre.

Although Balaban and Katz and the Rapps were to build many theatres, some larger and grander, the Chicago Theatre remained the epitome of the motion picture palace and the movie experience. In the *Balaban & Katz Magazine* of October 27, 1928, an article appeared entitled "The Wonder Theatre of the World." It said:

> Not only in Chicago, but in the Middle Western district which owns the city as its metropolis, The Chicago Theater is unquestionably the first institution that comes to mind when entertainment is discussed.
>
> If ever a theater was rightly named it is this Chicago Theater, for in dignity, character of entertainment, constant leadership and progressiveness, the theater expresses the spirit of the city whose name it bears.
>
> The Chicago Theater blazed the trail of the modern era of theater building in Chicago and elsewhere. It was erected in a time when the city was just beginning to bestir itself for the tremendous building campaign which has since produced skyscrapers, theaters, bridges and boulevards that have made Chicago "The Dream City." The Chicago Theater pointed the way to the city's destiny in that it gave Chicago a theater whose capacity, nobility of architecture and ideals transcended anything in the world.
>
> Since that day the Chicago Theater has been first in the affections of the 5,000,000 people of Greater Chicago, and it has been among the first sights of the city that out-of-town visitors ask to see. No other theater of the city has such a hold upon the populations of the Middle West that come frequently to the metropolis on pleasure and business.
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> Today the Chicago Theater is as distinctive a civic ornament to the city as it was the day when it was opened. Foresight built it in advance of its day as to style and character; its beauty is kept ever fresh and its programs are the last words in stage, screen and music productions, sound with worth-while quality and bright with continual innovation.
>
> The Chicago Theater is truly the world's wonder theater.

Cornelius Rapp maintained that the Chicago Theatre was the best work of the firm. It was the flagship of the Balaban and Katz chain.

The Chicago Theatre

The dimensions and proportions of the Chicago Theatre are immense. The auditorium is 164 feet wide, 106 feet deep, and 110 feet high. With its main floor, mezzanine and balcony, the theatre holds 3900 people. The Chicago Theatre when it opened was in size second only to the city's grand opera house, the Auditorium Theatre with 4200

seats.

The theatre building is L-shaped in plan and wraps around the Loop End Building at the southeast corner of State and Lake streets. The two buildings are linked physically. (The Lake Street facade of the Loop End Building is the only surviving example of cast-iron front architecture in Chicago; see appendix.) The main entrance is on State Street. The architectural inspiration is French, both on the interior and exterior.

The exterior design is based upon the Arc de Triomphe. This motif was particularly apparent at night when hundreds of lightbulbs imbedded in the facade traced its Second Empire features. Faced in a glazed, off-white terra cotta, the Triumphal arch is sixty feet wide and six stories high. It is topped by an ornate cornice, a seventh story faced in terra cotta, and a recessed brick two-story penthouse which houses the "Little Chicago," Balaban and Katz's smaller preview and try-out theatre.

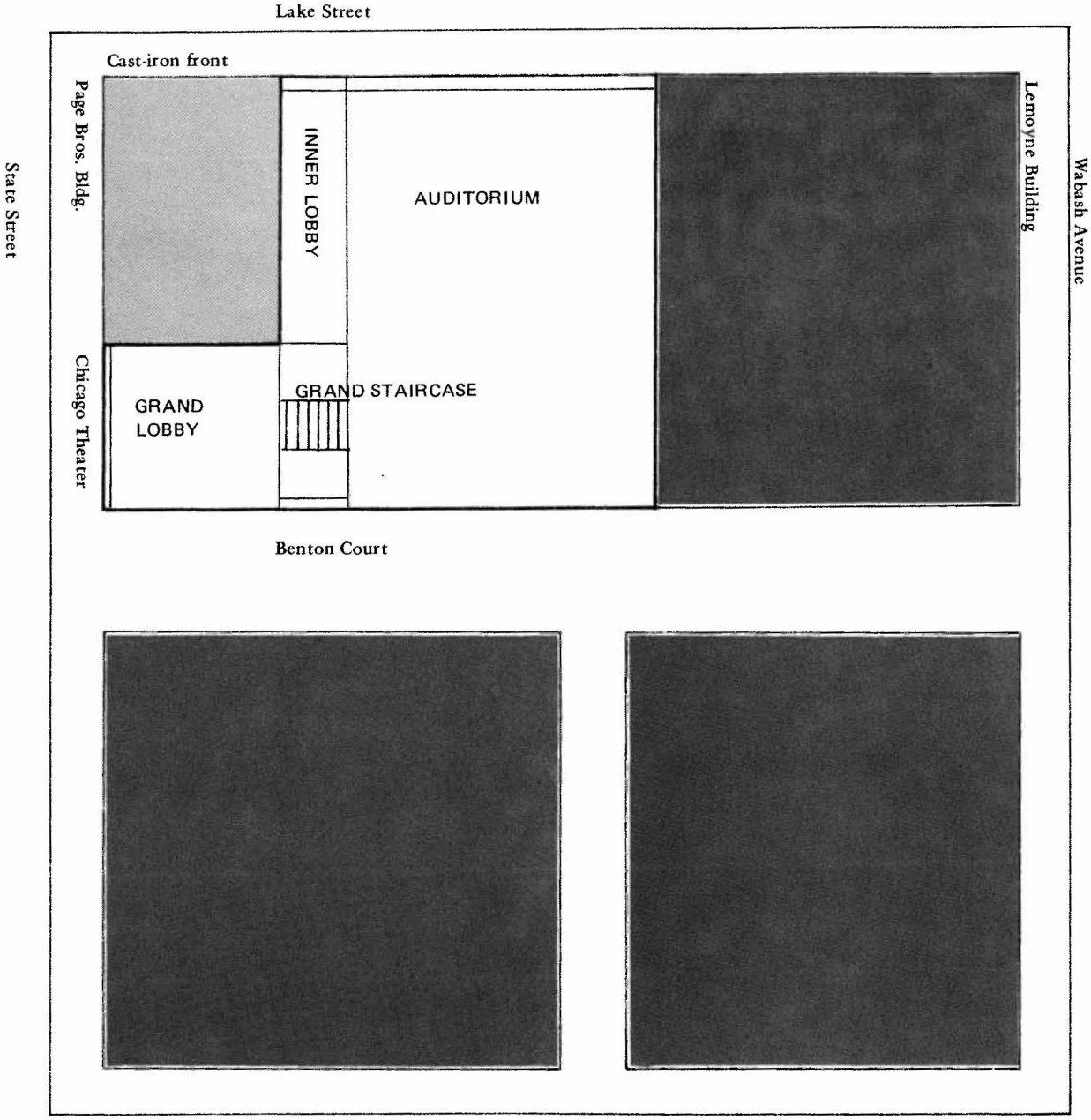
Within the arch is a grand window in which is set a large circular stained-glass panel bearing the coat-of-arms of the Balaban and Katz chain. The ornament of the facade, in molded terra cotta, uses baroque and classical motifs, including the masks of comedy and tragedy, floral garlands, cartouches, inset panels in high-relief, and broken pediments.

Of particular note on the facade is the marquee and large vertical sign. The present marquee is the third one for the theatre. The original low, flat canopy-like marquee was replaced around 1922-23 by a larger and more elaborate one with flashing pinwheels, swirls, and garlands of colored lights. It had large milk-glass attraction boards, and "Chicago" appeared in large letters on all three sides. The present marquee was built in 1949 and is similar to the one it replaced with the exception of the two side panels which are now solely attraction boards. The vertical sign is original and one of the few verticals in existence today. It is approximately six stories high and in plain, illuminated letters reads "Chicago." Throughout the years, the vertical sign has been a symbol of State Street.

The south wall of the theatre is on Benton Court. This wall is finished more simply than the State Street facade for about one-third of its length east from State. On this side is an entrance protected by its original metal canopy which is similar to the theatre's first marquee. The rest of this wall is of plain brick-work. The east wall abuts the building to the east, the Lemoyne Building (1915; Mundie and Jensen, architects).

The north wall, along Lake Street, is brick with terra-cotta trim. This facade presented the architects with a serious problem which

Plan of the Chicago Theatre and its environment:



not drawn to scale

they ingeniously solved. The Loop elevated runs above Lake Street on the north side of the site; the auditorium is located behind the north wall. To insulate the theatre from the racket of screeching train wheels, the architects built two north walls, one inside the other. This effectively soundproofed the auditorium. The main exit doors are located along Lake Street and are protected by the original metal canopy.

Theatre Interior

As with all of the motion picture palaces, the exterior gives but a hint of what was to be found on the inside. It is in the interior that the full expression of architectural splendor and fantasy is realized. The Chicago Theatre is a miniature Versailles, and like Louis XIV, Balaban and Katz spared no expense on its workmanship and materials.

Entering the theatre from State Street, through the inner ticket lobby, one arrives at the first of three grand spaces which lead to the auditorium. The Grand Lobby, located directly behind the great arched window, was inspired by Francois Mansart's Chapelle Royale at Versailles. Built on a regal scale, the enormous lobby holds the crowds of theatre patrons waiting for the next show to begin.

The grand lobby is five stories high and occupies the space in the short leg of the L-shaped building. It has an east-west axis. Gallery promenades surround the lobby at the mezzanine and upper balcony levels. The first floor of the lobby is faced with marbles: the floor in off-white trimmed in black and the walls in white trimmed in brown. This area is enclosed by twelve piers supporting the gallery and the two-story high columns and corner pilasters at the mezzanine level. The gallery balustrade, the columns, and pilasters are covered in scagliola, which is plaster finished to look like marble. The columns support an entablature and a vaulted ceiling in the center of which is a large rectangular dome. The surfaces are decorated with cast plaster relief ornament. Above the entablature, behind the open lunettes of the vault is the balcony gallery.

Opposite the great arched window, on the east side of the lobby, is a similar arch. Behind this arch is the grand staircase. The staircase, through a series of winding returns, rises to the upper balcony in full view from the grand lobby. To the south of the staircase is the small Benton Court entrance. To the north is the inner lobby.

The inner lobby connects the grand lobby and staircase with the auditorium aisles and the main exit doors on Lake Street. It has

a north-south axis. This space was originally three stories high; a false ceiling has since been installed above the second story entablature. Encircling galleries are at the second- and now hidden third-story levels. The space is defined by two-story pilasters with intricate plaster bas-relief ornament. They support a cast plaster entablature and a barrel vault ceiling (now also hidden). The lunettes of the vault were open to the third-story gallery. From the inner lobby, one enters the auditorium. Because of the shape of the site, the auditorium is wider than it is deep, providing excellent sight lines and an unusual intimacy for a theater of its size. The auditorium, at the main floor level, is shaped like a horseshoe; the curve centered at the rear narrows toward the proscenium. At the balcony level, this horseshoe shape is reversed; the curve centered at the proscenium broadens outward to the rear of the balcony. Along the rear wall above the main floor is the shallow mezzanine which seats about 400 people. Above the mezzanine and extending toward the prscenium over two-thirds of the main floor is the 1500-seat balcony. The balcony is supported by cantilevers, thus eliminating the need for column supports that would have obstructed main floor sight lines. Once clear of the overhanging balcony, the dome can be seen rising to a height of 110 feet.

The dome is supported on a drum which is punctured by open circles three feet in diameter. The drum is supported by a plain coved ceiling which follows the shape of the balcony walls. A series of ornate plaster moldings makes the transition from the circle of the drum to the horseshoe shape of the cove and balcony. A second coved ceiling, ornately paneled and decorated with murals depicting allegorical figures, completes the ceiling. Below this, the side and rear walls form an arcade.

The focus of the theatre is the proscenium and stage. The proscenium is seventy feet wide and meets the upper cove of the ceiling. In the center of the proscenium arch is a large mural of Apollo in his chariot, drawn by four white horses, pulling the sun across the sky. This painting dates from 1932.

The stage, which is 112 feet wide, 30 feet deep, and 90 feet high, is equipped with an orchestra pit and its original Wurlitzer pipe organ on a hydrolic platform. The pipes are housed on either side of the proscenium behind monumental arches. These arches are flanked by columns, supporting large broken pediments decorated with urns, cartouche, and garlands. Large filigree canopies cover the arches. The details throughout are in the style of Louis XIV.

The Last 57 Years

In addition to changes to the stage, dictated by changes in movie presentation, the Chicago Theatre has undergone two remodelings

since it was built. As the city prepared for the Century of Progress Exposition of 1933, the theatre was redecorated. The changes were confined to the lobbies, lounges, foyers, and promenades and basically affected only the furnishings. New carpeting, draperies, and upholstering were installed. Some repainting, including the present proscenium mural, was undertaken.

In 1949-50, many more serious changes were made. Rapp and Rapp began what publicity releases billed as a "Streamlining For a Palace of the 20's." Again, the streamlining affected basically the furnishings in the lobbies, foyers, and lounges. All the original bronze and crystal light fixtures, manufactured by the Pearlman Company, were removed. The Louis XIV-inspired furniture was replaced along with most of the paintings and statuary which decorated these areas. A false ceiling was built over the inner lobby and the plaster ornament of the pilasters there was covered over but not removed.

Draperies were hung to cover completely the grand arched windows and other areas once open to view. The most serious changes occurred to the lower level lounges which no longer retain their original designs. The four major spaces - the grand lobby, grand staircase, inner lobby, and the auditorium - suffered primarily from repainting which subdued their gilded and polychromed surfaces under a layer of neutral greys and beiges. Despite these changes, the Chicago Theatre remains essentially intact and continues to epitomize the motion picture palace of the 1920s. Most of the changes are reversible.

Theatre

The history of popular theater in the city of Chicago for four decades was largely created in the Chicago Theatre. The Chicago was an innovative theatre, and Balaban and Katz were master impresarios. The typical program would include first-run motion pictures, cartoons and short features, the daily newsreel, a live stage show, the Chicago Theatre Symphony Orchestra in the pit, and accompaniment or solo spots on the Wurlitzer organ.

In the 1920s and 1930s, with production designers such as Frank Cambria, the Chicago presented Fanny Brice, George Jessel, Sophie Tucker, and Eddie Cantor in ever more elaborate stage productions. Paul Whitman and John Phillip Sousa also played there. Rising costs in the 1940s and 1950s cut down on the lavishness of productions, but stage shows still featured Victor Borge, Jo Stafford, Danny Kaye, and Frank Sinatra.

Jesse Crawford played the Chicago's mightly Wurlitzer organ. The instrument arrived at the theatre in July, 1921 and originally had four manuals and twenty-six ranks to which additions have since been made. In 1970, the American Theatre Organ Society undertook

the restoration of the organ. On the occasion of its rededication, October 2, 1975, a commemorative brochure, *The Chicago Theatre,* published by the Theater Historical Society described some of the organ's features:

> The chambers on the left side (of the proscenium) are MAIN, on the bottom; FOUNDATION above; with the heads of the 32' Diaphones and relays above, just behind the oval window above the canopy. The right side has the SOLO on the bottom; PERCUSSION, center; and BRASS on top. Various percussions are in front of the swell blades, but behind decorative plaster. The most important additions were the treble Post Horn and Tuba Mirabilis ranks removed to the Chicago Theatre from the similar instrument in the Uptown theatre, to augment the Chicago's originals. Unusual features are stop arrangements, and the two brass saxophones. The current twenty-nine ranks are controlled by 207 stop tablets.
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> The sound is massive and powerful, but not extremely loud, and has always been popular for this unusually lush effect.